

Artists are to blame

Simon Barney

Artist-run galleries come and go with a regularity that somehow suggests activity, even liveliness. And there's much to be admired in these endeavours - the unpaid directors, the light and responsive structures, an engaging social scene, the acceptance of risk. A forum about these places took place during ARI (artist-run initiatives) week organised by the Museums and Galleries Foundation of New South Wales in early March 2001. (Artist-run initiatives - a phrase that might be supposed to indicate a distinct identity but is inescapably bureaucratic.) The forum's consensus was that artist-run galleries were an important, but threatened, part of the local art scene.

Who was at fault here? Was it the big bad property developers taking away our cute little 'spaces'? Or intransigent councils, ungrateful for the opportunity to spend money subsidising local artists? Or funding bodies that persist with arcane guidelines that fail to match the innovative changes artists are making? Well, err, actually none of the above. The fault lies entirely with the artists. We persist with a once radical model that is more often than not a poor man's version of a commercial or institutional gallery.

The scene that Saturday at the Tin Sheds Gallery was not so much depressing as lamentable. The room was set up with a lectern, a 'top' table, a mike and rows of chairs. Peering in the door you might have wondered 'what is this?' A downmarket shareholders meeting? Nuh, way too respectful. It needed a red-faced retiree, angrily waving a placard and berating the directors for their spiel, their spin, their fudging way with words and their lousy results. Maybe it was some kind of TV program. Oprah? Geraldo? Jerry Springer? There was a kind of compere (Ben Genocchio from *The Australian*) deciding who'd speak and for how long. But nuh, on TV they take the mike through the audience, they don't get stuck with a two metre mike cord, forcing their 'guests' to shout across the studio. No, unfortunately it resembled nothing so much as a 'forum' about 'artist-run initiatives'

Those of you who still retain a wistful image of artists as radical, disrespectful and obsessed with change need to go take a powder. Same if you imagine artists' activities are co-operative, un-hierarchical and open to un-expected possibilities. Call me a hippie but why weren't the chairs in a circle, and why wasn't the mike in the centre? It probably hadn't been given much thought but the top table model helps to 'keep it tasteful', to prevent anything uncomfortable like dissent. It suited the presentation of a hardworking idealistic and supportive community of artists put on display by a concerned government body. But if the intentions were good, why were the results so oppressive?

We'd been promised a discussion of internal and external models for artist-run galleries. External models meant sources of funding. Nobody seemed to have given a moment's thought to what 'internal model' might mean, but boy could they talk about money. Maybe that's why it seemed like a shareholders' bash. Now, I don't want to criticise the show put on by the artists on the panel as they weren't really helped by the setup. Speakers were Alex Gawronski, Sarah Goffman, Melissa Chiu (of Gallery 4a, which has arguably made a successful transition from an artist-run to a funded gallery), Leah Donan, Ruark Lewis' But the potted artist-run gallery memoir, which was largely what was on offer, at once charming, dreary, buoyant, self-deprecating and self-aggrandising had already been told better in Elizabeth Pulie's interviews, 'The Premise of the Premises' available at the back of the room for five bucks. She talked to artists who ran or had run galleries. (Declaration of self-interest: I'm in it, talking about SOUTH and Briefcase.) It was the best thing to come out of 'ArtPort - Artist-Run Initiatives Week' organised by the Museums and Galleries Foundation of New South Wales. And you know what? She and Lisa Andrew did it with their own money.

So that was it. Discussion of internal models went little further than things like opening hours, submissions, how to avoid meetings, and who bought the beer. All of it of some use I guess to anyone thinking of starting an artists' gallery - a bit like 'here's how I did it'. But none of it addressed the question of the value of all this - are such places genuinely successful or persistently servile?

Remember Le Corbousier's complaint about Regent Street in London? The decorative facades along the street suggest a diversity of buildings but step inside and you find the same unvarying floorplan. It's the same with artist galleries. Everyone strives on a low budget to look as much like a commercial gallery as possible, the only real difference being the less reliable sources of funds. It reminds me of the skin flick industry and its mimicry of Hollywood. Like Hollywood, porn has the revolving cast of bankable stars, do-anything young hopefuls, and shady dealmakers. Porn has the award nights, the nose jobs and boob jobs, the car crashes and suicides and the badly behaved divas. And every now and then somebody crosses over and appears in a Hollywood film, holding out the promise that it really can be a launch pad to real celebrity. On this day there seemed to be an acceptance, even a delight in the idea that artist galleries do well if they provide such a feeder system, an apprenticeship for the 'real' world of commercial galleries and funded institutions.

One or two people in the audience questioned this acceptance without response. This was partly a consequence of the dissipating effect of the compered format, and partly that the self-congratulatory mood of the afternoon left little room for a critical discussion. Yet somebody complained that there were no 'big' names present. Why would there be when artist's galleries only offer a poor imitation of the commercial world? Unless they do something that institutions and dealers can't they'll always be regarded condescendingly as the art world bargain basement. Given that artists will always go for the money and prestige there will always be feeder galleries where young artists can show how their work might look in a 'real' gallery. OK. But is that all? Does this encompass the possibilities for art, for its place in the culture, for what might constitute an art activity? Such activities might not be considered so marginal if artists weren't complicit in undervaluing them, didn't generally see 'graduation' to the next level of institution as a sign of success.

Instead of scrambling to keep afloat a style of gallery in which they are overmatched, artists might better look to their own strengths, to the areas in which they do have an advantage. Endeavouring to perform with the professionalism to which institutions aspire generally results in a culture of dependence. One member of the audience made the point that in her experience (with a performance group), this diverts a group of artists from the more radical activities they may initially have envisaged.

The 20th century dilemma over what is art is readily answered in 2001. Art is history. Art is what's in the history books. Art is what's in the museums. This is the inescapable dialogue of contemporary art. Art is contemporary in the sense that it's possible display in museums is contemporaneous with its making.

But in other areas of culture technology has dealt a blow to such top-down determinations. So why in art does the equivalent of self-publishing and self-recording offer no challenge? The answer lies in artists' fidelity to the existing models. Art is the last area for which the appeal to authority and a structure of exclusion is still the determinant of value. It isn't likely to change.

But in the meantime it wouldn't hurt for artists to make the methods of exhibition to which they devote their time an end in themselves - as structures with their own distinctive character unrepeatably by other areas of the art scene. This might genuinely leave open the question of what constitutes a gallery, what constitutes art, and what constitutes viewing. And it might make this part of the scene worth paying attention to.

Simon Barney is >>>

